

Opinion – A Feminist Foreign Policy for India: Where to Turn?

Written by Khushi Singh Rathore

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KHUSHI SINGH RATHORE, AUG 6 2021

'If domination and inequality are to be ended, the root cause of these have to be identified and eliminated so that India and other countries can live in security, and plan for progress and peace...there is a concept of a model society and model world order which we are aiming at, and in this, national and international...are not separable' (C. B Muthamma 1988). Sweden was the first country to have adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014. Next, Canada (2017) formulated its feminist international assistance policy focused on gender equality and promoting the safety of women and girls in its foreign aid assistance. Soon after, the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs announced the development of a feminist foreign policy white paper. In 2019 France declared its intent to develop a feminist foreign policy framework. Recently, Mexico became the first Latin American and Global South country to adopt FFP explicitly.

Margot Wallström, the former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, defined Sweden's FFP as 'standing against the systematic and global subordination of women and a "precondition" for achieving Sweden's wider foreign development and security policy objectives.' The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) defines it as a 'political framework' focused on 'the wellbeing of marginalized people and invokes processes of self-reflection regarding foreign policy's hierarchical global systems'. FFP goes beyond the conventional conceptualization of foreign policy thinking and opens the 'black box' by offering an intersectional approach towards security 'from the viewpoint of the most vulnerable'. CFFP explains it to be a multidimensional policy framework, aiming at elevating the experiences and agency of women and marginalized communities 'to scrutinize the destructive forces of patriarchy, colonization, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism'.

To sum it up, it would be correct to say that, in theory, FFP is an approach to foreign policy thought and practice committed to gender justice and equality and is rooted in humanitarian principles, consistently working towards dismantling all oppressive structures that dictate world politics. It is an approach that does not merely talk about 'adding women'; instead, it works towards ensuring substantive changes in the hierarchical world of international relations at the most fundamental level. Thus, FFP aspires to build a better, more equal and just world.

The discourse on the FFP agenda is often begins with the legacy of UNSCR 1325, and rightly so, in the feminist imagination of the foreign policy approach and the resultant push for the leap already taken by a few countries in that direction. However, one cannot overlook that while the phrase 'gender sensitive' still makes it to the realms of foreign policymaking, 'feminisms' continue to unsettle most sitting in the high corridors of power. Thus, there is still a long way to go.

The discourse on feminist foreign policy for India is a work in progress, with most scholars very aptly highlighting the moral and strategic advantage of such a push for India. With its skewed sex ratio and a rising crime against women (National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) notes that on average, India recorded 87 rape cases daily in 2019, a 7% rise from 2018) & 140th place, 28 places down from its previous ranking, in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report, the adoption of a feminist approach in all spheres of politics comes to be the most logical course for the country; India would also benefit internationally with active advocacy for equal representation for women. Latter is a tricky slope though and one warranting caution seeing the current state of Indian democracy.

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So far, India's commitment to a 'gender-sensitive foreign policy' has been primarily outward-looking. It has advocated at international forums for goals that resonate with UNSCR 1325 & WPS agenda ideals, efforts mainly situated under the paradigm of peacekeeping and development assistance. However, it has refrained from adopting a WPS National Action Plan (NAP) to date. Despite ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979), it has also not ratified the Optional Protocol that allows women to directly approach the CEDAW committee in case the domestic state apparatus fails in aiding justice.

Soumita Basu argues that 'gender matters in international affairs, in words if not always in deeds'. Thus, it is imperative for the push for a feminist foreign policy for India, albeit its currency in the international forum, to not unintentionally reduce the Indian version of FFP to mere outward inclusion of 'gender' in the lexicon without commitment to a domestic allegiance to the feminist way ahead. Therefore, one asks, can there be a feminist foreign policy without commitment to feminist governance? I would say no. FFP is not merely about adding women; it has to be an overhaul in the political outlook and culture by incorporating transformative principles of feminism.

The question then is, where does India turn for a roadmap to FFP? A conventional argument would be to look at the countries that have already adopted FFP that could inspire others on their path of a feminist turn in their dealing with the world. Though well placed, absolute reliance on this tangent of thought runs the risk of such a discourse giving an impression that FFP is a phenomenon that has developed in its entirety in the global North. While it is true that the explicit policy framework and the term FFP was born in the developed countries of the West, one has to dig deeper and ask whether the ethos and core tenets of FFP are really that new to the non-Western post-colonial states?

Reflecting on the early political history of independent India, Swati Parashar brings to our attention how Indian history presents one with shades and 'elements of gender-sensitive foreign policy and what is effectively being called feminist foreign policy' today. She also cautions that this is not to say that these tenets were deliberately conceptualized with feminist ideals in mind or that gender equality was a core aim of these. However, it is the synergy between the vision of an independent India for itself in the world and how that is reflected in its foreign policy outlook.

Throwing light on the convergences in the journey of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and women's movement, Devaki Jain and Shubha Chacko write:

A cursory glance at the history of the NAM reveals that the basic elements that informed its approach to international issues included the right of independent judgement, the struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism, and moderation in relations with all big powers. Rather than passive neutrality or isolationist policy of non-involvement in all conflicts, it was an assertion of agency on the part of Third World nations that was considered the hallmark of being 'sovereign' and 'independent'.

They further elucidate how the underlying principles informing feminist discourse and praxis, and the NAM conferences and declarations can be found in the 'idea of self-determination' of those vulnerable and often bereft of power. This definition reads closely to the present-day parameters of FFP as mentioned above, with the fundamental values of both non-alignment and FFP premised in the tenets of justice, equality, solidarity and peace.

Then, is a FFP framework unimaginable or alien to India with its rich anticolonial past and history of women's movements? I would say, not really. Instead, I argue that in the anticolonial thinking and revolutionary women's international thought, one can trace the values that come to be defined today as FFP. Countries like India have to look at their past, even before the moment of non-alignment, study the visions of the 'one world' that marked their initiation into the post-WWII world stage. In this decolonial vision, one should look for the inspiration for feminist foreign policy, especially in women's history that is more often than not rendered subservient to chronicles of nationalism in South Asian historiography. In these terrains of forgotten international thought, one can find various forms of feminist consciousness rooted in anti-imperial political thought and an early blueprint that had the potential to transform into what is today called feminist foreign policy.

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